

The Late Night Artist's Request

By Jenny Brownrigg

In the past, I have been the warden of an artist residency centre located in the middle of nowhere. I have also been an artist-in-residence three times, finding myself in very different situations, including the suburbs of a busy city, a forest, and an island. From these experiences, I can recall vividly how my brain would start to work late at night. No matter where I was, it always would.

I am an educator now.

Anxieties, insecurities, niggling technicalities, pertinent questions, all of them propel lines of thought into requests for action. Some die in the first light of the day, as they are judged to be non-sense, whilst others must be carried through.

Perhaps it is during these 'in-between' times, when one day is over but the next one has not yet begun, that such nagging thoughts have the space to bubble up to the surface. Perhaps it is also the 'in-between' status of the artist-in-residence, which creates this space; away from home but then again in a new 'home', having to quickly demonstrate conversancy with a novel context. The artist has to negotiate this fresh territory in a meaningful way.

As a consequence, I started to facilitate other artists' late night requests, and I became their material at-hand in times of need: I have worn a costume and rowed a sinking boat; I have made additional jellies shaped like rabbits with cherries for eyes for a festival stall; I have rolled turf over an artist lodged in the ground as part of a performance; and I have filmed from the barriers of a demolition derby with cars routinely spinning out of control. My skills and my presence made me the additional person that could help out when the artist needed to improvise with what- or whoever was within arms' length.

Others have helped me. When the rain came down and washed the ink off a monochrome billboard picture, we mounted ladders and painted in the waterlogged areas with black acrylic to redefine the absentee image.

I have also heard tales from others. The latest one was about an eminent elderly performance artist who decided to not ask for help one late night, but instead used the time to make a new piece of work. He

was **o**in a rural residency and had worked until late at night to finalise his concluding exhibition. He was given a ride from the gallery to his accommodation, only to find out that he was locked out of his lodgings. Instead of making a late call to his assistants, who had already sped away in their car, he stopped, and started to think. His art was all about the nature of time and how work could address the situation one finds oneself in. In his mind he started to trace a line from his bed-and-breakfast place to the gallery. He then walked this line, back and forth, until the gallery opened in the morning.

What rises up through this necklace of thoughts is the word *improvisation*. What does *to improvise* mean in the context of an artist residency?

Incidental
Make and make and make
im **P**romptu
time **R**ich
step **O**utside
con **V**ersations
Intangible
Stopping the old routine
new **E**xperience

Improvisation is a response to the stimulus of an immediate environment, a set of circumstances and thoughts. When the 'proper' solution is not at hand, improvisation is a way to create the unpredictable answer in the moment. Toolkits have been developed in business and education to give specific approaches to problems. I would like to propose that what was sketched out above as a 'improvised' toolkit, is actually what we should be teaching and adopting in order to adapt to the uncertain nature of our condition.

In the context of an artist-in-residence, embrace the unpredictability of the situation. Art's processes are often about the intangible. The smallest inconsequential detail can often be the most important. Be open. In your new situation you will meet new people. You will soak up so much information. You will be time rich, away from your normal routine. You will be called upon to be proficient with new challenges and sometimes you will doubt whether you have the skills to meet them. This is all normal.

In 1934 the poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote to a young writer who had asked for his critique and advice on his poems: “Live your questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the futureanswer”¹

As uncertainty is a major factor of life, it is unnatural and unwise to seek the perfect answer. Instead, remember the improvised toolkit as a way to begin to embrace that, which remains unresolved, and start to live the questions.

¹ Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet, 1934, reissued by WW Norton & Company Ltd, London, 2004.